Doorkeepers

The Doorkeepers that are proposed are Paul Arthur, Yorkshire Area, and John Marron, Yorkshire Area. Is that agreed? (Agreed)

Can I now invite Wayne Thomas to take the Chair.

CHAIR: (Mr W Thomas, Vice President of the National Union of Mineworkers) Morning conference, I would like now to invite Mr Nicky Wilson to give the President's address to conference.

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

MR N WILSON (President of the National Union of Mineworkers): Thank you Chair.

Conference, we meet here in Barnsley at a time of continuing turmoil in the world's economies. The collapse of some of the major banks in 2008 has meant that economies throughout the world have never recovered, and for many has meant recession. We have seen how economic problems in one country sends out shockwaves which puts other countries economies into a downward spiral.

The banks that caused the initial problems with their involvement in giving out mortgages and loans which were never going to be repaid have moved from one crisis to another. Mis-selling of insurance cover, bad investment decisions driven by greed to earn bonuses, and now the alleged manipulation of LIBOR rates. This has led to a complete loss of confidence and trust in our banking system, which in the past was always deemed to be a safe haven for people to place their hard earned cash.

It may be that we will never know the true damage some of these decisions have made to the economies of many countries, and more importantly the effects on the finances of the general population. If we take the manipulation of setting the LIBOR rate, what we do know is that it has affected business loans, personal loans and mortgage rates. Who can say how many firms have gone bust because of this? How many decent workers have lot their jobs? How many families have had their homes repossessed, and had their standard of living forced down by the actions of the few

driven by the greed of profit and their own bonus earnings to the detriment of everyone else?

Conference, I say this. If these individuals, no matter how far up the ladder they may be, are found guilty of the charges of manipulating the LIBOR rates, there should be no ifs, no buts about prosecuting the individuals involved, and making them pay for the suffering they have caused so many throughout with their greed.

Conference, this Government in this country has adopted a policy of austerity in order to stabilise our economy as they see it. There is one word I believe to describe this plan, and the handling of the economy, and that is failure. It is an easy phrase to trip off the tongue "We need austerity measures", but the truth is the effect it has had and will continue to have on the British people is horrendous for the most part. May be not for the small percentage at the top who own most of the wealth, but the vast majority of people in this country have been affected by the severe cuts brought on by this Government. The financial cutbacks on our public services, which has led to hundreds of thousands of job losses. Pay freezes for public service workers, now going into the third year, and attacks on their pension schemes. Our National Health Service and education system being starved of proper investment, and staff being pressurised to do more with less resources. Investment in our construction and infrastructure being cut, with the knock on effect of potential job creation. The attacks on our welfare state, which ultimately affects the most vulnerable in our society. The vast increase in unemployment, especially affecting our young people, who are our future after all.

What can be more demoralising than a young person, working hard throughout their years in education, and finding thee is no work for them at the end of their endeavours, or a worker who has been in employment for many years, suddenly being made unemployed because of Government cutbacks, or because their company has been forced to close or cutback because the banks will not lend or their interest rates are too high?

Conference, the Trade Unions have adopted a slogan, there is a better way, and that is the truth. The economic policies of this coalition Government have failed, and the effects on the British

people are being felt more and more. They cannot go on forever blaming the last Government for all their failings. Since the ill thought out budget, we have seen a number of U turns from this Government, but we need a radical change in direction, to increase investment in our public services and the country's infrastructure. To create jobs, and have people paying tax, instead of creating unemployment, and working people forced on to benefits, which they in turn are cutting, therefore creating even more poverty.

The Trade Unions are not alone in calling for a direction change. The Labour Party have said from day one, this country should be investing, not cutting back to the extremes of this coalition Government. America has in a similar way had a policy of investing in their economy, and albeit very slowly, their economy is growing, not like this one in a double dip recession. It is also welcoming to see the newly elected Socialist President in France committing to an economic policy of investment.

Conference, it is critical that we continue to do all we can to support our Labour colleagues in Parliament in trying to change this disastrous economic policy of the coalition Government.

So far, conference, I have addressed the wider financial problems we face, but I would now like to address some of the problems our own industry has faced, and continues to do so. Almost all of the companies where our are members are employed are facing difficulties in this time of economic turmoil, and although coal prices rose dramatically a couple of years ago, they have dropped just as dramatically in the recent past, which obviously has a detrimental effect on the price the companies are paid for the coal they produce.

Couple this with the mining problems both our deep and surface mines have faced, especially in the last period. These range from geological faulting, equipment failure, adverse weather conditions, to sometimes downright bad management planning. This has meant it has been a very difficult time for our union to negotiate improvements in earnings and terms and conditions. But negotiate we did, and arguably, when we look around about us at how other groups of workers have

been treated, with their wage cuts, wage freezes, increased working time, we probably have done better than a lot.

The National Negotiating Committee did change how we conducted our wage negotiations, whereby, in the case of UK Coal for example, after every negotiating meeting with the company we met with the local branch officials, in order not only to update them, but more importantly to get their views on the ongoing offers being offered from the company. In the case of UK Coal, the union refused to accept the final offer on the table, and it was agreed with the company that we would take part in ACAS for conciliation. But let me say clearly, this was only agreed on the basis that any agreement, if it was reached and accepted by our membership, it was clear that our members at Thoresby and Daw Mill would receive that final settlement, which was a complete change from the past, and conference, we cannot take away the importance of this, and it should not be missed, that after years of imposed wage deals negotiated by the UDM, the NUM were in this case the lead negotiating union, and I believe, from what I have been told, that this led to a complete reversal where the UDM membership at Daw Mill Colliery demanded from their leadership a ballot on the negotiated settlement agreed by the NUM.

The National Negotiating Committee were clear that in no way an ideal settlement was reached, but under the circumstances we achieved a deal that we can say clearly, and people who know and were involved in it, was very different from what was on offer when we first started negotiations with the company.

In a similar vein, the agreement reached at Hatfield Colliery could in no way be claimed as an ideal deal. But we were in the main negotiations, and if at this present time we were still in negotiations, in my view in Hatfield there would be nothing on the table whatsoever, and it emphasises the importance of timing stages with regards to wage negotiations. But again, I pay tribute to the Hatfield branch officials for their assistance and contribution during the lengthy wage negotiations at the colliery.

The other wage negotiations we were involved in at Maltby have now been put on hold until September, with agreement from the branch. The difficulty at that particular colliery was that despite repeated requests from September 2011 to the previous branch officials of Maltby, for the branch to submit their wage increase to the National Negotiating Committee in order for us to start talks, we did not receive this until April 2012, and unfortunately by the time it started Maltby was in financial difficulties.

There is no doubt, conference, we are facing an uphill battle to hold on to what we have in deep mining without closure or job losses. UK Coal are still saying Daw Mill will close in 2014, but I can assure you that as a union we are adamant there is a future in the long term for all three of our UK Coal coal mines. Also both at Hatfield and Maltby, who are likely to have face gaps, it is crucial we work together to ensure these are as short as possible, and to get these collieries back on to a sound financial footing and secure the future which they can have.

There is some good news stories on the horizon, as once again there is a possibility of the Margam reserves being opened in South Wales, and this has been a long ongoing project, and the other two large collieries which are operating in South Wales continue to develop to move to production, and while I am on the subject of South Wales, it would be remiss of me not to mention the passing and closing of Tower Colliery in South Wales since our last conference. We should once again pay tribute to the success of the Tower Colliery project, and the bravery and aptitude of the men who invested their redundancy money to buy the pit, and make it a success for so many years, and it is also pleasing to see that the co-operative will be further enhanced financially by developing a surface mine project which could last for up to ten years, and which could mean at least a few million pounds going into the local communities who the co-operative have involved from the beginning, in the planning from beginning to end of the particular site.

We also have planning permission being sought in Scotland for a new coal fired power station with full carbon capture capability in the Grangemouth area, which is exactly where the

Longannet reserves lie. There are also indications in the future that coal prices will begin to rise again, and that is why, conference, it is imperative that this union, along with others, continues to protect and maintain what we have in coal mining, to protect our members jobs and terms and conditions in the longer term when things may improve, and when we get through the difficult period to come, we continue to press for an expansion of coal mining in the United Kingdom, with all the well debated benefits this would mean to this country.

Once again we see that the latest energy White Paper shows coal as a forgotten fuel. We must not underestimate the battle we have in continuing to keep coal as a key energy producer. The Government's emission performance standards, which is part of the White Paper, and which is supposed to limit emissions from power stations, has once again created a bias against coal, because emissions from gas fired power stations are not to be taken into account.

In 2011, conference, coal generation supplied 30% of the UK's electricity, and at peak times during the last winter this level rose to well over 50%. Coal is a vital component of the UK energy mix, with the UK coal industry directly providing just over 6,000 jobs, and supports a similar number in coal powered stations, combined with rail and transport infrastructure.

The UK has plentiful coal reserves, currently estimated to be at least 3.1 billion tonnes, which would last around 60 years at current production levels. This is far more than our gas reserves for instance, which are 30 years maximum at current production levels, and may decrease with more gas usage. This Government now has policies to develop renewables, nuclear and now gas generation, but nothing to ensure that the UK coal reserves are being exploited for the benefit of this nation. So we clearly demand that Government energy strategy should include coal with carbon capture and storage as a major player in the transition to a low carbon economy.

This union is represented on the TUC by our National Secretary, Chris Kitchen, and we should thank Chris for ensuring the case for coal and its future is kept to the fore. He has also persuaded the TUC to give a submission to the Government's paper, arguing the case for coal along

with carbon capture and storage to be an integral part of our country's future energy needs.

Another crucial topic we are involved in at the moment is the Government's proposal to change the legislation affecting the mining industry with regards to safety, and let me say, as a union we accept there are parts of mining legislation that are dated and have not been used for many years. But let me also emphasise, what we will not accept is any attempt to weaken mining legislation to the detriment of our members who work in this industry.

As a union we are fully involved in the ongoing consultation about proposed changes. Two days ago the National Officials met with the new Chief Inspector of Mines and some of his team to get a presentation of how the Health and Safety Executive are taking this forward. They outlined where they see the changes being without weakening the legislation. They also gave us a timetable of how the proposed changes and consultation will be achieved. In turn, we have requested that the NUM would be involved at all stages, and that this union will challenge any attempt to weaken mining legislation, and they did agree that this is the input that they need and require, and that any documents that are relevant would be sent to the union.

We have also informed them that the union's National Executive Committee have given the National Officials permission to involve an expert in mining legislation to work with the union on this consultation, and we have agreed that Ian Thompson, a former mines inspector, will advise us and work with us on these matters, because let me re-emphasise conference, this union's commitment to ensuring safety in the mines is still our main priority.

Unfortunately, since we last met, we have had a number of fatalities at Gleision, Kellingley and Maltby, which proves what we all know, that no matter how much equipment changes, technology improves or methods change, our members are working in an environment where a dangerous occurrence are potentially ever present. This union has a proud history of leading the fight for a safer mining industry, that gives adequate protection to our membership and others working in the mining industry, and we must continue to be vigilant in ensuring that our members are not placed

in danger by unsafe practices, deliberate or otherwise.

Can I also pay tribute to the importance of the role played by our 1 2 3 inspectors, ensuring that safety is a priority in the collieries they work in, and as a union I can assure you we will be doing all we can to ensure that any future mining legislation continues to have the right of the union to appoint 1 2 3 inspectors, and that they continue to have their powers under legislation.

Conference, the national union has since the last conference had a number of ongoing internal issues to deal with, and it would be remiss of me not to report these to conference. We have had unfortunately to bring disciplinary charges against one branch's officials, which have not been concluded at this stage, and are still proceeding through the union's appeal procedure, and I can say that the NEC did not take this action lightly. They felt they had no other option due to the serious allegations made by branch officials against a member of the NUM staff.

We have also had, in my knowledge, the unprecedented position of a victorious candidate in the Yorkshire Area agent secretaries election refusing to sign his contract and offer of employment and taking up the position, and can I say despite offers to discuss the problem over the contract face to face, instead of by correspondence, as how it happened, this was never taken up, except in the final piece of correspondence where there was an offer to agree to a meeting providing Arthur Scargill was in attendance, by which time the NEC instruction to start the timetable for the rerun of the election had been reached, and that process has now begun, and unfortunately with the repercussions, the extra cost it will incur.

Can I also say that in my time involved in this union, which goes back nearly 40 years, I have never come across the levels of misinformation that have been floating around during the Yorkshire Area agent secretary election. There have been a number of anonymous publications that have been brought to my attention, and I can understand why they are anonymous, because - and I call them correctly in my view - the cowards who produce this material are anonymous because the are complete lies, fabrications and misinformation contained within them, and the personal attacks,

especially on our National Secretary, Chris Kitchen, would leave them liable for slander or legal action against them.

I do appeal to our membership, if they have any knowledge of any individual who is producing such material, they should inform the union and not drag what should be a normal debate, a normal challenge between individuals down into the gutter, as some of this material is doing, and then if that does happen, I can assure you on behalf of the NEC action will be taken, if it is appropriate, against anyone found dealing in this, and the pedlars of filth that are doing it.

There has also been a number of signed letters produced during the period, which yesterday, when I put the subject in front of the National Executive Committee, they have agreed that this, all material produced during the last election, and the forthcoming one, will be placed in front of the National Executive Committee, or the new one that takes place, and a debate and a discussion will take place, because I have got to say, even in some of the signed letters that were produced, they are full of untruths and personalisation and attacks on members of this union. So that is subject matter for a future debate, and people who ask for democracy, that is the way it should be, so they may well get their wish in the future. I would hope, colleagues, that during the next election campaign, this misinformation and untruths that have been peddled about in the first election process do not continue.

I can also confirm to conference, the contract of employment on offer, as agreed by the National Executive Committee, will be exactly the same as the one on offer during the first election procedure. The one change we have made is we have offered that anyone interested in standing for the position can come into this office and view what indeed the contract says, so I hope there is no divide in the future.

Colleagues, the NEC have been supporting our National Secretary in his efforts to cut the costs and turn around the union's finances. In the intervening period, we have sold or are in the process of selling a number of properties owned by the union to save on outgoings and bring monies

into the union's finances. We are nearing completion of a leasing arrangement for the NUM Sheffield office, which has remained empty and a drain on the resources through payment of rates since 1994, costing this union hundreds of thousands of pounds in monies.

By getting the union on to proper actual and legal advice, we have also changed from being informed by the NUM Superannuation Scheme, under its previous Chairman, Mr Scargill, that the union would have to pay £600,000 a year for ten years in deficit payments to a nil deficit payment for the next two years, and it emphasises that sometimes we may have to spend some money, but the savings in this particular instance has been tremendous. By supporting the work of the National Secretary, we hope to achieve a situation whereby this union's finances are on a much sounder financial basis.

Conference, can I say it is an honour and a privilege to be elected to the position of National President of this great union. I have now for 40 years held positions from branch, area to national level, and in that time this union has given and taught me how to stand up for workers rights, how to negotiate on behalf of our members, how to speak on public platforms, and I pledge to use that experience gained over many years to ensure that working together as National Officials, National Executive Committee, Areas and Branches, we will give the best service possible to our members, which must be our prime aim.

We are facing some difficult and turbulent times ahead, but I am convinced that if we sort out our internal differences, and work together, we can move forward to achieve a better and longer lasting future for all our members. Thank you. (Applause)

CHAIR: Thank you very much indeed for that, President. I would like to thank the President for his address to conference this morning, I think some of those relevant points we will be discussing during conference no doubt. I would like to invite the President to take the Chair for the duration of the conference.

CHAIR: (Mr N Wilson, President of the National Union of Mineworkers) Thank you.